Telephone interview with RADM Donald P. "Pete" Roane, USN, (Ret.), Commander, Destroyer Squadron 23 during Operation Frequent Wind, April-May 1975. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 10 August 2007.

What was your title back then?
Commander, Destroyer Squadron 23.

So you were riding the *Kirk* [DE-1087] as your flagship, so to speak.
Yes. I think there were three ships in the squadron deployed at that time.

What orders had you received ahead of time to alert you that Operation Frequent Wind was about to happen?
Everybody in 7th Fleet was told to go muster off the coast of Vietnam. We knew the evacuations were about to take place and that we should expect helicopters but we didn't know they were going to come out by the "bazillions."

Were you aboard the Kirk when it left San Diego?
As I recall, I went from San Diego to Pearl Harbor in the *Bronstein* [DE-1037]. It was all part of a training exercise called RIMPAC. Then I transferred to the *Kirk*. While we were in Hawaii, the *Kirk*'s schedule was changed. There was an older carrier there--the *Hancock* [CVA-19]. They loaded the *Hancock* with big helicopters for performing evacuations. I think her regular aircraft were stored below or left behind in Pearl; the helicopters were on the flight deck.

We then went to the Philippines and then around to Cambodia for what was called Eagle Pull. This was the evacuation of our embassy in Cambodia. We spend a few days there and then went to Singapore where we got the word that we were to stand offshore to expect the evacuation of Saigon and the rest of Vietnam.

What kind of relationship developed between you and the skipper and crew of the *Kirk*?
We were the staff. Our job was not to direct the motions of the *Kirk* but to oversee the activities of our ships that were deployed. At times there were other ships assigned to us. But at this stage we were just embarked in the *Kirk*. There was another squadron commander, Joe Metcalf, who was on scene at Eagle Pull. He had been waiting there for 3 weeks for that to take place when we showed up the next day. That's where the *Hancock* used its helicopters to go ashore and bring people out from the embassy in Cambodia.

The assemblage off Saigon was everything the 7th Fleet could muster--amphibious ships, carrier groups, and all the surface combatants. We were under various tactical commands. RADM Don Whitmire was the amphibious force commander in the 7th Fleet and he was pretty much in charge of the overall evacuation. He was in the *Blue Ridge* [LCC-19].

Do you recall getting specific orders stationing the *Kirk* where it was? How did all the ships know where they were supposed to be?
No, I don't recall receiving any specific orders. We gathered and pretty much took our own positions. When the helicopters started coming, they would just head for ships. *Kirk* had a man it its CIC [Combat Information Center] who had done a tour in Vietnam and spoke a little

Vietnamese. He was an air controller. He quickly got on the radio and told pilots in Vietnamese that the *Kirk*'s flight deck was available. Then he gave the hull number of the ship.

And so they started coming. We spent the 30th of April and the next day receiving helicopters. We could accommodate two at a time while others were out there hovering and running out of gas. They were full of people. After they got off we took what electronics and loose gear we could out of the helicopters and then threw the helicopters over the side. Then the next helicopter would come in. That went on the day of the 30th and the next day, too, the 1st of May.

It was late at night on the 1st that we rendezvoused with the *Blue Ridge* and Rich Armitage came aboard.

How were you introduced to Armitage?

We were told to go to the *Blue Ridge*, pick up a passenger, and when he came aboard, we were to take our directions from him. So we introduced ourselves to each other when he came over the side.

How was he dressed?

Here was a young fellow in a sports coat at midnight in the South China Sea after 2 days of hectic operations.

Did you find all of that a little odd?

You bet it was. Usually you would expect such a person to be anyone from a commander to a captain, someone from some staff who was relaying the orders of the admiral. But we were told to take our directions from this gentleman who came aboard and so we did. He said there were a number of ships at Con Son Island, which was south of us, and we were to go there, get them organized, take them out, and transit them to the Philippines.

Armitage was pretty young at the time.

Yes. He was a young fellow.

You were obviously taken aback by the fact that he was so young and looked the way he did. He was a civilian and not a naval officer. Were you somewhat suspicious of him?

Not at all. We brought him aboard and immediately formed a team. We just said, "Okay. Let's go." I had a question of myself last night. There were probably somewhere between 50 and 100 ships out there. How come they picked the *Kirk*? It could be because we had a squadron commander aboard. I wasn't the senior guy so I didn't have any other real job at the time. Maybe they decided that was it. But for some reason they told the *Kirk* to go.

So we went down to Con Son Island. Rich and some of the crew went in and gathered on those ships. We had radio traffic back and forth. Then they got underway and proceeded out of the harbor and we escorted them east across the South China Sea.

How far had you gone toward Subic when you turned around to go to Con Son Island?

We were still pretty much in the area. There was a lot of milling around going on at that time.

When you headed toward Con Son Island, do you recall what other ships accompanied you?

It was just the *Kirk*. I wouldn't call this the most organized operation I had ever seen. There was a lot of independence out there. Ships had come from different places and had been on different assignments and exercises. And they were just gathered off of Vietnam and from there they started back east towards the Philippines. Before we could really get going, we were turned to go to the *Blue Ridge* and take aboard a passenger. If it sounds strange, it is.

From the time you picked up Armitage, how long did it take you to get to Con Son Island?

I think we arrived there sometime the next day. It was less than a few hundred miles at most from where we were. It wasn't very far. All the way back to the Philippines was roughly 800 miles.

What did you see when you arrived at Con Son Island?

We were at a distance, maybe 5 or 10 miles offshore and could see an island with ships in the harbor. They weren't very distinguishable at the time.

How did Armitage and his party get ashore?

In the ship's motor whaleboat.

Was there any reason you were so far offshore?

Five miles is not that far a distance. You stay in the area where it's comfortable to steam. There was no reason to go closer. And if anything happened, you wanted to be far enough offshore so you could be flexible.

Were you under the threat of air attack by the North Vietnamese? Was there any concern about that?

I don't believe there was any concern of any kind of attack at that time.

Do you recall how many folks went ashore in the motor whaleboat?

No, I couldn't tell you how many there were.

How long were they ashore?

A few hours.

And their job was to coordinate the ships.

Just to confirm that everyone was there and ready to go.

CAPT Jacobs has told me that Navy personnel were put aboard some of those ships to see whether their engines were operating.

We had to do a lot of that--help them with the engines. There were situations where we transferred people to a lot of other ships. There was a merchant ship that needed some help. Our crew members just went and gave them a hand.

And the next day you began heading east like the good shepherd.

Yes. By then they were organizing themselves. As I recall, the original plan was to get them going and we were then proceed back to Subic by ourselves. But once we saw the condition of things, we just decided to stick with them.

When you saw these ships coming out, what were your thoughts on this motley looking fleet?

One, they were crowded. Two, they just straggled out. I can remember one terrible thing. There was an LST near us. Two of their ships got together to transfer some people. And they started crowding from one ship to another. Somehow a young girl was pushed into the water. The next thing I knew, the person who had pushed her was shot. They just didn't put up with that. So they took care of that person on the spot.

Chief Burwinkel was aboard at the time and told me that story. He said the girl was accidentally pushed over the side because a panic was developing.

They weren't going to let things get out of hand is the best way to describe it. That incident happened on the first day we were getting things organized.

As you proceeded east across the China Sea, you had to do so at the speed of the slowest ship.

As slow as the slowest ship. We were going maybe 4, 5, sometimes as much as 10 knots. I distinctly remember one diesel powered small craft that had trouble going as slow as the rest of them. He managed to steam at about 8 knots while everybody else was going 7. And he went in circles just to wait for everybody else.

By this time, other U.S. ships were accompanying you.

Yes. By the time we got going, several other ships joined us. I don't think anybody was directing them what to do. They came up and said, "We'll help." Everybody knew that each of us was heading in the general direction of Subic. It was just a lend-a-hand kind of thing.

While all this was going on, did Armitage come back to the *Kirk*?

Yes.

Was his job pretty much over at that point?

He was certainly helping to coordinate everything. He knew people who were involved. If something was developing, he would be able to say, "Here's what we ought to do. We just worked together. He really knew how to work with people and how to render his influence when it was necessary.

You never got the impression that he was pushing his weight around?

No. Never. He was in the background. I got the cruise book out this morning and looked through it. I cannot find a picture of him or a mention of him.

As you got closer to Subic, an additional issue became apparent. Marcos didn't want to allow you folks to land because he was afraid of offending North Vietnam.

We were scheduled to go in about the middle of the day on the 6th or 7th of May. Then we got the word that negotiations were in progress to get us into harbor. So we had to wait for things to get settled. We formed a square offshore and steamed in this box all night long.

Overnight we got the word that we couldn't take Vietnamese ships into harbor. Instead we had to have U.S. officers board those ships, take custody of them, and enter harbor as United States ships. So we looked at each other and said, "Okay, we've got to write some orders."

So we wrote some orders. The orders said, "To ENS John Smith. Take custody of HQ-17 and proceed into Subic Bay." And each of the ships did that. The taking custody process was very emotional. It was about 10 in the morning. The cruise book says it happened at noon. Whenever it was, we stopped all ships and put the officers aboard. We hauled down the Vietnamese flag and hoisted an American flag over each ship. Our officer would relieve the commanding officer of the Vietnamese ship and took custody. He actually took command but we didn't call it "taking command." We didn't have our officers in command of. They were in custody of. I guess that's an administrative statement even though we were giving direction.

They stopped, hauled down their flag, and sang their national anthem. Each ship had anywhere from 20 to a thousand people aboard. But that was a very emotional moment for the Vietnamese people. It was the end of their country. They no longer had a flag they could look up to.

Did you actually witness any of this close up?

Yes. I wrote myself a set of orders and took command of the flagship, HQ-17. Our biggest problem was finding 20 or so American flags. We had plenty of ensigns but didn't have enough ensigns, if you know what I mean. In other words, we had more 1-stripers than we had 13-stripers!

So you wrote yourself up a set of orders and went aboard HQ-17. That must have been very emotional for you.

Terribly emotional. When I got aboard, I met their CNO.

What was his demeanor at the time? How did you let him know you were relieving him?

They knew what was happening. Again, the word circulated amongst them because they knew that so much was at stake. It happened and that was it.

What became of the Vietnamese flag s? Did people take them as souvenirs?

I imagine they kept them. I have one that was given to me by the admiral. I think it was his personal flag. He also gave me a police special revolver. I think I might have the captain's sidearm. Rich Armitage has a pearl-handled revolver that one of them gave him.

Once you took charge, did the Vietnamese crew still run the ship?

They ran the ship and I gave them directions. "We're going into Subic." So that was no problem.

Did you have an interpreter?

They understood enough English.

What do you recall about coming into the harbor?

After we had conducted the transfer, we got another message. "You can't take them in because they still have their Vietnamese bow numbers." So it would appear to the casual observer that Vietnamese ships were entering the harbor, even though we had American flags flying.

We were ordered to obliterate the bow numbers and the identification from the outside of those ships as being Vietnamese. So we put boats in the water and with paint rollers and buckets of gray paint, sailors went around and rolled out the bow numbers. They were now just ships entering the harbor under American flags with no bow numbers.

Each and every one of those ships had at one time been a U.S. ship--Coast Guard, Navy--and had been transferred to the Vietnamese navy. So they just became U.S. vessels again.

Once all the paint jobs had been completed, what happened then? Was there enough pier space for all those ships?

Most anchored in the harbor. We anchored, boarding parties came out from Subic, some of them feeling very official and expressing the feelings that, "These might be dangerous people. Some might be subversive and North Vietnamese. We'd better go out and secure them."

So a bunch of Marines came aboard and we had to convince them that the situation was under control. Coming across, the Vietnamese themselves constituted a civil organization that identified themselves by province. They were pretty well organized. They may have gone aboard the ships at Con Son in groups like this. Once the Marines were convinced that there wouldn't be trouble, things settled down pretty well.

How were the ships evacuated?

I went ashore and went back aboard the *Kirk*. That became the job of our own and the Philippine authorities. I don't know whether they came ashore from those boats or not. I do know that the next move was to get them to Guam. The Philippines were not ready to accept the people of Vietnam. Our government decided to establish a camp on Guam for them to assemble and eventually to resettle in the United States. The refugees were transferred to MSTS ships– freighters and ships like that.

In the meantime, there were other Vietnamese who had escaped in various craft. They hadn't come in helicopters and hadn't come with the fleet from Con Son. They were coming across the China Sea and rather than going into the Philippines, the idea was to meet them offshore and have them directed to Guam. At that time the U.S. Navy began positioning a couple of ships off the coast, including the *Vega* [AF-59], which was a food store ship. Other ships were stationed outside of Subic to intercept these ships and redirect them to Guam. That was a pretty miserable thing they were being told to do. That's about a 2,000-mile trip across the Philippine Sea. The South China Sea was a placid lake at that time of year. The Philippine Sea is open ocean and it would have been a more difficult journey.

As I recall, our ships were prepared to take them aboard. We ended up having ships take these people to Guam. *Kirk* went into port with a main feed pump problem. They shut down the engineering plant and went to work on the main feed pump. In the meantime, there came another set of orders to COMDESRON-23 to take a frigate to go offshore and participate and help direct these ships that were coming and head them in the right direction. Since the *Kirk* was unavailable, we found the *Harold Holt* [FF-1074]. One other staff officer--the staff engineer--and I went out because the rest of the staff was busy planning for some further operations. We

left them ashore with the *Kirk*. Then he and I went out for what we thought was a fairly routine thing.

About the time we got out there and before we saw any Vietnamese ships, there was a message directly to COMDESRON-23 from the chief of staff of 7th Fleet telling us to proceed to the Gulf of Thailand. And it referred to another message and asked if we held it, which we did. It was a report that the *Mayaguez* had been hijacked in the Gulf of Thailand.

We speeded up the *Harold Holt* and headed west again. I had spent about a day or so in Subic and didn't have much to do with the refugees from that time on because we went to the *Mayaguez*. That operation took until about the 16th of May, and because there had been an exercise scheduled with the Thai navy, the rest of our staff left Subic on the *Schofield* [FFG-3]. On the way back to Subic in the *Harold Holt*, I transferred back over to the *Schofield* and returned to Thailand for this exercise. So in the aftermath of the evacuations and the *Mayaguez* incident, things that happened in Subic, I didn't have much to do with. And then we came back to prepare for an annual exercise in the Indian Ocean.

It's been 35 years since Operation Frequent Wind. Do you think about that time much anymore?

Yes I do. It will just come to mind. So much happened in such a short time. There was no planning as far as we were concerned. We weren't involved in months of preparation. We were going to the Western Pacific on a routine deployment. We certainly didn't expect that kind of a thing to happen to us.

Well, you managed to pull it off really well.

Yes. The whole Navy did. That's what we were there for. That's what we were ready for--to be able to do anything. But you never know what that anything will consist of. In a larger sense, ADM Whitmire had a lot dropped in his lap when he was told to gather the available 7th Fleet ships off Saigon and take aboard whoever came out. And that's what he did. It's just something you live your life for.